DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 464 971 UD 034 984

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TITLE A Brief for Practitioners on Turning Around Low-Performing Schools: Implications at the School, District, and State Levels.

INSTITUTION National Clearinghouse for Comprehensive School Reform, Washington, DC.

SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.

PUB DATE 2001-04-00

NOTE 14p.; Highlights of the Regional Forum on Turning Around Low-Performing Schools (Philadelphia, PA, November 9-10, 2000).

CONTRACT ED-99-CO-0137

AVAILABLE FROM National Clearinghouse for Comprehensive School Reform, 2121 K Street N.W., Suite 250, Washington, DC 20037. Tel: 877-766-4277 (Toll Free); Fax: 877-308-4995; e-mail: AskNCCSR@goodschools.gwu.edu; Web site: http://www.goodschools.gwu.edu.

PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS *Academic Achievement; Cultural Context; *Educational Change; *Educational Improvement; Elementary Secondary Education; *High Risk Students; Low Achievement; Poverty; School Community Relationship; Teacher Collaboration

IDENTIFIERS *Low Performing Schools

ABSTRACT

In 2000, the U.S. Department of Education and the Consortium for Policy Research in Education invited a range of people involved in schoolwide improvement to the Regional Forum on Turning Around Low-Performing Schools. Participants examined the responsibilities of federal, state, and local entities to do what is needed for students in high poverty communities to reach levels of academic excellence. This brief captures highlights of the conversation among participants that directly address the concerns of practitioners working at the local level. It begins by discussing the foundation and themes for engaging in whole school improvement. Participants shared the strategies and lessons learned from their engagement with schoolwide reform, focusing on three themes: the process of change requires sustained commitment and collaboration across community and governance structures; the transformational process of turning around low performing schools requires that leaders and stakeholders acknowledge and proactively address the context and complex set of factors influencing schools and communities; and connections must be built between teachers, administrators, and the community. The themes, taken individually and together as a framework, have implications for how practitioners approach low-performing schools and provide support to making improved teaching and learning a reality. (SM)

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April 2001

National Clearinghouse for Comprehensive School Reform

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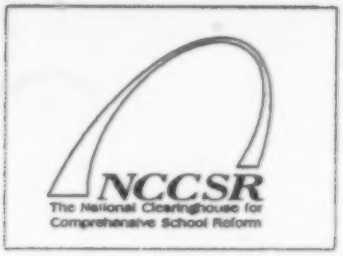
THE NATIONAL CLEARINGHOUSE FOR COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL REFORM

A Brief for Practitioners on Turning Around Low-Performing Schools: Implications at the School, District, and State Levels

By Naomi G. Housman and Monica R. Martinez



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Introduction

In November 2000, the U.S. Department of Education and the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) invited a range of individuals involved in schoolwide improvement to the Regional Forum on Turning Around Low-Performing Schools. The participants—a mix of practitioners, researchers, and policymakers—spent a day and a half sharing what they have learned and how the U.S. Department of Education can most strategically and effectively focus technical assistance to support schools, districts, and states. The panelists were also asked to consider policy issues that need to be addressed at the federal and state levels to turn around low-performing schools. This brief captures the highlights of the conversation that speak most directly to practitioners working at the local level. The policy implications emerging from the proceedings are covered more fully in a companion brief produced by CPRE.

A Foundation and Themes for Engaging in Whole School Improvement

The forum began with a brief overview of Department programs and the Low-Performing Schools Initiative in the context of standards-based reform—and the local and federal accountability measures now "beginning to bite." With the bar raised for student achievement, low-performing schools identified, and systems of reward and sanction in place, the assembled group was asked to consider whether the will and the capacity exists in every community and in every state to provide help to the places that need it most. Will the promise of the standards movement become a reality or an empty gesture?

Primary federal funding sources for whole school improvement—the Title I Schoolwide and the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration programs—provide nearly identical conceptual frameworks for school improvement, as well as funds to bring technical assistance to the school. The framework is designed to put the school in the driver's seat in the assessment of its needs, development of a unifying vision for con-

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tinuous improvement, and sustained implementation of research-based strategies around a comprehensive plan. Chronically low-performing schools, however, usually cannot engage in and sustain improvement without support from local and state infrastructures.

As the symposium discussants shared the strategies and lessons learned from their engagement with schoolwide reform, three themes emerged: coherence, context and complexity, and connection. The themes, taken individually and together as a framework, have implications for how practitioners approach low-performing schools and provide support to make improved teaching and learning a reality.

Organizing Around a Vision: Coherence

Working towards coherence in low-performing schools—often characterized as dysfunctional or unstable—requires leadership and policy with vision. Leaders at all levels are needed who can help develop, communicate, and nurture a vision shared by the school and community. First and foremost, however, leaders must believe and communicate that all children can, and must, achieve to high standards. Only when leaders make this message the core theme will systems begin to organize and build the infrastructure needed to support high quality teaching and learning for all students.

State leaders in North Carolina, for example, have demonstrated how belief in all children can translate into the commitment of resources and infrastructure around focused policy. The state made its focus the goals of turning around low-performing schools and "upwardly" closing the minority achievement gap statewide by accelerating the progress of the lowest performing students so that they can reach the high achievement levels expected of all students. Strategies to accomplish this are based on ten recommendations made to the state board of education by a state advisory commission on closing the achievement gap. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) state leadership and Black Leadership Caucus mobilized to influence the placement of experienced teachers in low-performing schools. One strategy adopted by the state has been to bring high quality retired teachers back into the workforce. North Carolina studied a model in five pilot school systems across the state where financial incentives are awarded to schools showing progress: all certified educators receive a bonus of $750, and if exemplary progress is shown, they receive a $1500 bonus. If the school demonstrates through disaggregated data that it has made significant progress in raising the achievement of ethnic minorities at a level that has kept pace with overall achievement, the whole school receives additional monies.

In any state, local leaders must also facilitate the development of a shared vision to guide district and school efforts. Once a low-performing school or district has identified its goals and needs, the challenge is to design a comprehensive, coherent plan around which all programs and funds are aligned. School districts approach this process in various ways. In some districts, the focus of reform efforts at all schools is selected at the district level; in others, each school determines its own vital needs. Often, however, district leaders struggle to find a balance between giving schools autonomy in the planning process and simply mandating a course of action for schools that lack the capacity or will to engage in an improvement process.

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One urban district chose literacy as its "theory of action" for all schools, and made an explicit commitment to raising achievement by focusing on children in the bottom two quartiles. Though the district chose the focus, schools were free to select whatever whole school reform model or models would "move the focus forward." The district, in turn, used the unified focus to provide a coherent, literacy-based, professional development plan for teachers and principals across the district. Another system began with a different approach to turning around its low-performing schools district-wide. Rather than select the focus for all schools, the district gave each school time and support to develop its own focus. While the district did intervene if a school, after a given period of time, failed to develop a shared vision and plan for change, the district was committed to letting staff grapple with what needed to happen in their school as a way to begin building capacity at the site level.

In addition to developing a shared vision, one of the first issues that a low-performing school considers in any comprehensive improvement effort is whether or not it has the funds to support the effort. Often, the dilemma is not lack of funds—low-performing schools frequently have twice as many programs as other schools—but lack of a coherent plan with a set of goals around which these programs are organized. In many high poverty districts, it is common practice to obtain as many funds as possible; but without a strategic plan, the end result is a disconnected set of programs layered one on top of the other. Rather than simply infuse more money into the system, what these schools need most is assistance to undergo a comprehensive needs assessment process in which data are reviewed, disaggregated, and then held

up to the programs. Often, what schools require is a process of "organized abandonment," in which programs are discarded and pared down only to those most closely serving student and school needs.

Statewide accountability systems can also play a major role to influence and encourage schools and districts to reallocate federal, state, and local funds in a focused, strategic way. In one state, schools were required to submit consolidated plans identifying goals, strategies, and use of funds in matrix format. In the process of lining up programs alongside their intended purposes, schools often realized that they lacked a coherent plan and were duplicating the use of funds. In essence, schools and districts saw that money was driving their priorities, rather than any one mission or set of goals. In another state, a chronically low-performing district identified literacy as its focus and then used a financial audit to look at all grants and programs in the district and locate the focus on literacy instruction in each. This level of analysis allowed the district to hone in and see where efforts needed to be ramped up or pared down. Ultimately, the district chose to scale down its programs in preparation for a more focused and strategic scaling up process.

Schools, however, need good information about the structure and requirements of state and federal funds in order to allocate resources effectively. Schools and districts often are unaware of the flexibility built in to federal programs to encourage coordination across funding streams. For example, a school that has made professional development a top priority could begin to leverage the money in various program "pots"—such as funds available through CSRD and the Reading Excellence Act—to meet this goal. Federal and state program leaders need to help practitioners understand how

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these program funds—and the state and district bureaucracies administering them—are intended to work together in new ways towards the goal of improved teaching and learning.

For many low-performing schools and districts, the success of their efforts—developing and implementing a comprehensive improvement plan with programs and resources aligned around a shared vision—will be determined by student scores on statewide standardized assessments. While state accountability systems of sanction and reward can successfully motivate a chronically low-performing school to initiate schoolwide improvement efforts, high-stakes assessments can also force a school's attention away from a long-term improvement process that creates deep and lasting change in its practices. It was noted that when schools are only held accountable for a single test score, it should come as no surprise that classrooms likely will place a heavy emphasis on test preparation activity and suspend, or abandon, other more comprehensive improvement efforts. The disincentive may be even greater when the state assessment is not aligned with the state standards, or when districts are given little guidance interpreting a curriculum from the state standards. Thus, schools choosing to stay the course of comprehensive school reform must invest significant effort to align

school/district goals and curriculum with state standards and assessments, as well as to ensure that classroom instruction reflects this alignment.

It was suggested that having a set of "indicators of improvement" would facilitate schools' and districts' ability to maintain coherence between the local efforts and state expectations. Districts could use indicators that identify, and determine at what rate, low-performing schools are indeed turning around, and to determine if and when interventions are needed. Indicators would also allow schools to begin self-identifying their status "before it's too late" and the stigma of a label or sanctions are imposed externally. One district is using a set of "trailing" indicators—evidence of past efforts—to show schools how they have done so far, and are now building a system of "leading" indicators, or benchmarks, to guide schools' current and future efforts. As part of this, the district also will provide subject/grade level assessments so that schools and parents do not have to wait until third and fourth grade to find out whether students are making progress and instructional practices are effective.

Acknowledging and Addressing Context and Complexity

One of the points made early in the discussion is that context matters in fundamental and significant ways. Thus, characteristics attributed to ineffective schools cannot simply be understood as "the mirror image" of those attributed to effective schools. Low-performing schools have unique challenges that require unique approaches and strategies. Designing a meaningful and effective approach, however, requires a process of grappling with the context and complexity—the socioeconomic, political, cultural, and historical realities—that influence the school and community in which it functions. By understanding these multiple layers, schools can begin to meaningfully and thoughtfully interpret student indicators such as test scores and dropout rates, and to allocate resources and services in a way that will have the greatest impact.

One of the most important roles for leaders at all levels is to facilitate an ongoing conversation about the school as a dynamic and complex organization. Leaders, particularly at the federal and state levels, were encouraged to use the "bully pulpit" to address public and business community perceptions that there is a "quick fix" for improving schools, and to "acknowledge the complexity and acknowledge it loudly." Furthermore, leaders at all levels must take initiative to talk openly and publicly about the courage, and painstaking work, it will take to turn around low-performing schools. However, because long-lasting

change is an ongoing process that may require several years' time to show measurable results, school leaders must also find more immediate ways to meet needs in high poverty communities.

To make an immediate impact, one district with a dismally low high school graduation rate started a dropout recovery program. The district recruited those who had left school, often to work and/or raise children, by creating a flexible program that adapted the traditional school day schedule to meet students' needs. The dropout recovery program responded to a deep community need by providing opportunity for students who had already dropped out, as well as for those who, lacking other options, might otherwise have dropped out. Because it quickly and dramatically increased the number of high school graduates, the program's success generated positive press attention and helped to build community support for the superintendent's more long-term improvement plans.

A major, but often overlooked, part of what makes the school a complex organization is the work lives of its teachers—the experiences and belief systems they bring to the classroom, and how they cope with daily challenges. Changing teacher beliefs about how students learn can be one of the most powerful ways to create fundamental change in a school. Experience has shown that teachers' low expectations begin to shift when they acquire the tools and skills they need to be effective teachers in their classrooms—and begin to see for themselves that their students can learn. This remains true for teachers who are identified as "in the middle." District administrators find that many teachers in low-performing schools are "in the middle"—teachers who have the potential to be great teachers given the right support. Unfortunately, however, most teachers are being asked to do what they have not been able to do before, and in a context for which they have not been adequately prepared. Consequently, teachers who express low expectations for their students often feel demoralized by the fact that they lack the skills and tools to help these students learn.

The principle that low-performing schools are unique and will require unique strategies also applies to the content and delivery

of professional development. A plan for professional development should be designed so that efforts are coherent, are based on the specific needs of the school, and recognize the experiences and skills of its teachers and administrators. Further, professional development must be grounded in adult learning theory—what is known about how adults learn and change. In the next section of this brief, professional development is addressed as a vehicle for building meaningful support among teachers as professional colleagues.

Several discussants shared the vital role local institutions of higher education and other community organizations can play in developing effective strategies to retain quality teachers in low-performing schools. One state university-based initiative used state and local funds to work across five districts in a region to support novice teachers in high poverty low-performing schools, and to help veteran teachers work on content to sharpen their skills. In another city, a private college of education and the non-profit branch of a teacher research center are working collaboratively to support teachers in their first three to five years in the classroom. The goal of the partnership is to explore ways to help new teachers create and be active participants in professional learning communities.

Community-based "intermediary" organizations can also play a key role in preparing and supporting teachers. In one urban district where a highly structured literacy curriculum model was adopted, the local education fund worked in partnership with the school district to create a "literacy intern model." The model, funded through the federal class size reduction program, was designed to recruit and induct novice teachers. In the program, non-certificated college graduates are trained in the school's literacy curriculum and spend their first year in the classroom as tutors, or literacy interns. The interns are also paired with veteran teachers who act as mentors as the interns acquire instructional skills and classroom experience. By using the structured literacy curriculum to train new teachers, the intern model provides aspiring teachers with the support and experience they will need to assume full responsibility of a classroom, and in the process meets the school's need both for tutors and prepared teachers.

The discussion underscored the fact that no one strategy alone is the "magic bullet" for turning around all low-performing schools. In the process of ongoing improvement, creativity, innovation and full participation are key ingredients. From the many examples offered, it is clear that low-performing schools require unique and multiple strategies to address the context and complexity of the school and its community.

Building Connections

Teachers and principals in low-performing schools tend to work in isolation from one another rather than as colleagues in a professional learning community. Breaking down these walls and building "connectivity" among educators is ultimately about making an impact on the classroom—where changes in teaching and learning must occur. A new culture must be created, in the relationships among and between students, teachers, and the community so that all are more meaningfully connected to one another and to the school as a place of learning. Connectivity is about focused professional development and creating a learning community for educators within the school and across school lines. It is about swinging open the doors of the

Breaking down these walls and building "connectivity" among educators is ultimately about making an impact on the classroom—where changes in teaching and learning must occur.

classroom and of the school, and creating a professional network that minimizes isolation and provides a venue for sharing, learning and continuous improvement. It is about connecting schools with expertise from both internal and external sources, and building capacity in the school.

Participants noted how uncommon it is for a school facing a challenge to look to the resources of a neighboring school right within the same district. District policies typically do not support this kind of interaction, but instead rely mainly on external technical assistance providers to "drop in" and solve a school's problems. Others, however, were able to share examples of districts actively attempting to counter this tendency. In one urban community, district leadership created opportunities for conversation among school principals as a way to capitalize on the fact that a range of reform models were being adopted across the district. In these cross-school meetings, principals share which elements of the model are or are not working, what they are learning from the model's technical assistance providers, and what their school is learning through the improvement process. Principals also participate in cross-school study groups and site visits.

In an ambitious effort to reduce isolation among teachers and administrators not only within, but also across urban, rural, and suburban districts, a city agency and a university professor created a regional consortium now consisting of thirty-one districts. The consortium's goal is to build relationships and learning opportunities through a professional network that spans the region. As a result of meetings convened by the consortium, seven educators decided to work together, jointly submitted a federal grant application, and were subsequently awarded $700,000 earmarked for professional development activities.

In addition to focused and comprehensive professional development, school leaders find that the only way to change habits of practice among teachers—many of whom have become accustomed to professional isolation—is to provide structured opportunities for teachers to work on improving instructional practice with their colleagues during the school day. Perhaps one of the most effective ways to break down isolation among classrooms is common planning time for teachers to have professional conversations, both formal and informal, on a daily basis. Additional time for teachers' professional development is particularly crucial for schools under state pressure to implement fully and successfully a comprehensive school reform model that requires teachers to practice new methods of instruction. District leaders noted that teacher unions often have been highly supportive of the school improvement process by making it possible to build additional time for teachers to plan during and after the school day.

Districts have employed other strategies in an effort to facilitate interaction among teachers. For instance, to foster a professional learning community, one district is turning its standard observation assessment system into a tool for providing the kind of support and in-class coaching that would most benefit each teacher. Many participants also

agreed that technology can be a powerful tool for creating connectivity, particularly as a way for more isolated rural schools to gain access to learning networks and resources. Securing the funds and infrastructure required to do so, however, often remains a challenge. Nonetheless, schools and districts that understand the importance of a professional learning community continue to seek new and creative ways to increase opportunities for teacher interaction and active engagement in improving student learning.

In addition to the lack of connectivity among educators, low-performing schools often are also characterized by the lack of personal connection between teachers and their students. The way that most schools are structured—particularly on the secondary level—leaves little room for the vast majority of students to form positive, caring relationships with adults in the school. Participants offered strategies to foster such an environment, including reducing class size and the overall size of schools. Where the physical dimensions—the traditional school building and number of students—are difficult to change, many schools have created multiple "schools within a school" so that each student in a large school has the benefit of a small, intimate learning community. Extended day and summer programs were also noted as effective strategies for building meaningful student-teacher relationships and for maintaining academic continuity throughout the year.

In addition, connecting the school to the students' families remains a major challenge for most high poverty schools. One urban district's approach is to make what happens in the classroom more "transparent"—visible and accessible—to parents. Principals take photographs of student work and teachers in action and present them to parents to help describe how the district focus on literacy is helping improve student achievement. Sharing school and district data with parents on a regular basis is an important way for school leaders to build awareness, support, and discourse, as well as to tap into the resources that parents and other community members can offer to inform the improvement process.

A district committed to involving community members in the school worked with the teachers' union to develop a district-wide community engagement initiative. The "Family, School and Community Partnership Committee" was established with representatives from the community, district and school level professional and support staff. The committee identified three major areas of concern—communication, literacy, and parenting—and then created a committee to explore the needs, related issues, and possible solutions for each. Based on one committee's recommendations to improve communication between the school and community, the district is now training parent liaisons for each neighborhood school. The liaisons' role is to listen and work with parents, many of whom are reluctant to go directly to administrators to share their concerns. The district has also invested in the translation of all school policies into the seven predominant languages spoken by families in the community. One key to the specialized committees' success is that school administrators do not serve as chairs; instead, a representative from the community and a professional staff member jointly chair each committee.

Closing Thoughts for the Journey Ahead: Commitment and Collaboration

The U.S. Department of Education's first regional forum on turning around low-performing schools began an important conversation about the responsibilities of federal, state, and local entities to do what is needed for students in high poverty communities to reach levels of academic excellence. Participants in the forum offered a range of effective policies and practices based on the successes and failures of schools and districts engaged in comprehensive school improvement. Along with the effective strategies and lessons from the field, participants also offered additional questions and uncertainties to be grappled with in the work that lies ahead. From the dialogue, however, a clear message emerged: the process of change requires sustained commitment and collaboration across community and governance structures. Further, the transformational process of turning around low-performing schools requires that leaders and stakeholders acknowledge and proactively address the context and complex set of factors influencing schools and communities. Organizing around a shared vision for coherence and deeper connectivity among educators, students and families, lays the foundation for the journey.

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The National Clearinghouse for Comprehensive School Reform (NCCSR) is funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement. It is operated by The George Washington University under Contract No. ED-99-CO-0137 in partnership with the Council for Basic Education and the Institute for Educational Leadership. The views expressed do not necessarily reflect the views of The George Washington University or the U.S. Department of Education. The mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations does not imply endorsement by the U.S. Government. Readers are free to duplicate and use these materials in keeping with accepted publication standards. NCCSR requests that proper credit be given in the event of reproduction.

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